Vegetarian pregnancy, vegetarian babies

'all the information you need'

Vegetarian Society
Vegan Kat has an active toddler and another baby on the way
INTRODUCTION

For many of us, thinking about parenthood, being pregnant or having a new baby can lead to a lifestyle reassessment: we all want to do our best for our children's health and, with new responsibilities, we want to be certain of our own health and fitness too. The best reassurance about the suitability of a vegetarian or vegan diet for pregnant women and babies comes from the people who really know: the women who have had trouble-free vegetarian and vegan pregnancies, and the proud parents of healthy vegetarian and vegan children. All the stories and photographs in this booklet are 'real': we think you'll agree that it makes an inspiring read!

PRE-CONCEPTION

The health of both mother and baby is influenced not only by diet during pregnancy but also by diet before conception. Eating a healthy diet before conception will give your body a good store of nutrients for the baby to draw on during pregnancy. The foetus is most susceptible to nutritional imbalance during the first few months of pregnancy because this is the time of most rapid development.

If you take the contraceptive pill, it is a good idea to come off and use an alternative method of contraception a few months before conceiving. This is because the pill can alter levels of some nutrients, particularly vitamin B6, folate and zinc. Ensure that you have a well-balanced diet with plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables (especially green vegetables) and wholegrain cereals, and try to avoid fatty foods, sweets, biscuits and cakes. Now is also the time to make other healthy lifestyle changes such as stopping smoking and cutting way back on alcohol.

If you find you are pregnant before you have had time to think about pre-conception, then don't worry, there is still plenty of time to make healthy changes to your diet.

I had two very straightforward pregnancies apart from some heartburn in the last couple of months. Dylan weighed 10lb 1oz and Elias 9lb, so they were off to a good start. Both were born by emergency caesarean and I made a very rapid recovery from both and surprised even the midwife!

Rochel
PREGNANCY

Pregnancy is a time when good nutrition is vital, for vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike. It is a time of readjustment as well as growth. The nine months are divided up into three divisions of three months each called trimesters. Many women experience changes in mood, activity and appetite with the different stages of pregnancy. There is no truth in the old saying that pregnancy means eating for two. The extra energy needed averages less than 200 kilocalories a day for nine months. This is equivalent to two slices of bread with margarine or a small jacket potato with baked beans or cheese. Some women do feel a lot more hungry than this and if they are gaining weight at the right rate, they should eat according to their appetite.

The “Balance of Good Health” advice given to the general population equally applies to vegetarians. A healthy diet includes plenty of fruit and vegetables and starchy foods, moderate amounts of alternatives to meat and fish, and moderate amounts of dairy produce or alternatives, and small amounts of foods containing fat and sugar.

The following advice need not be strictly adhered to every day, but as long as the general diet essentially follows the guidelines outlined a balanced and healthy diet should be achieved.

THE BALANCE OF GOOD HEALTH

- **Fruit and vegetables**
  5 portions daily
  Fresh, frozen, juiced, canned or dried fruit and vegetables.
  Supply in particular vitamins, minerals and fibre.

- **Alternatives to meat and fish**
  2-3 portions daily
  Include a variety of pulses, nuts, seeds, eggs and other soya, Quorn™ and wheat proteins in the diet to ensure adequate intakes of protein, minerals and vitamins.

- **Foods containing fat, foods containing sugar**
  0-3 portions daily
  Although some fat is needed in the diet, eat these foods sparingly, and look out for low fat alternatives.

- **Bread, other cereals and potatoes**
  5 portions daily
  Make these starchy foods the basis of most meals. Try to include wholemeal or wholegrain versions when possible. Avoid adding too much fat. Supply carbohydrates, fibre, protein and some vitamins and minerals.

- **Milk and dairy products**
  2-3 portions daily
  Good sources of calcium, protein and some vitamins. If avoiding dairy foods, choose fortified soya, rice or oat drinks or ensure other foods high in calcium are included.
**Fluid**

You may find that you are more thirsty during pregnancy. This is natural as fluid intake should increase. Never allow yourself to become over thirsty and include plenty of fresh water, dilute fruit juices, milk (soya or cow’s) and herb teas. Drinks containing caffeine (tea, coffee and cola) should be limited and alcohol should be avoided altogether if possible.

**Protein**

Increased protein needs in pregnancy are usually met simply by the extra calories from more foods. Protein can be found in dairy products, cereals, pulses, nuts, seeds, eggs and other soya, mycoprotein and wheat proteins. Intake of dairy products and eggs should not increase dramatically since it is possible that excessive amounts may sensitise the baby in the womb to allergies towards these foods.

**Iron**

The need for iron is increased during pregnancy, especially during the later stages. Anaemia, due to iron deficiency, is common in pregnancy whether you are vegetarian or not. Good vegetarian sources of iron are wholegrain cereals, pulses, leafy green vegetables and dried fruits. Iron absorption is increased dramatically if taken with a good source of vitamin C, which can be found in fresh fruit and vegetables, so having a glass of fruit juice with a main iron rich meal is ideal.

Iron levels normally decrease during pregnancy as the blood becomes more dilute. If a blood test demonstrates your iron stores are low, your doctor may prescribe iron tablets, so if you are not sure you are eating enough iron rich foods, you may wish to consider taking an iron supplement, but, as with all supplements, be careful to follow instructions.

**Calcium and Vitamin D**

The body needs extra calcium during pregnancy, especially in the later stages, to enable the baby's bones to develop. Calcium absorption from the gut is more efficient during pregnancy and this should provide enough to meet requirements, however, vegans and vegetarian women who consume few dairy products need to be particularly careful to ensure adequate calcium in the diet. Some vegan women, especially if they intend to breast-feed, may decide that a

**0-3 Months**

Women usually feel different and may experience tiredness or sickness particularly in the morning. Calorie needs are only about 100 kilo-calories more in the early stages of pregnancy and some women do not experience much increase in appetite until the end of this period.

**3-6 Months**

Appetite usually increases after the first three months though since considerable reductions usually occur in physical activity and metabolic rate this helps to compensate for the increased needs. Extra calorie needs should be met by cereals, pulses, nuts and seeds, dairy products (unless vegan) and starchy vegetables such as potatoes.

**6-9 Months**

The baby is maturing now and this is a time for easing up on activity and preparing for the birth, though this is the period when an extra 200 kilo-calories a day are needed. The baby takes up a lot of space and may press on the stomach, reducing the capacity for food, so many women feel they need to eat small meals more frequently at this stage. Normal weight gain during pregnancy is one and a half to two stones (10 to 12.5kg). Weight gain often slows down during the last few months of pregnancy.
calcium supplement is a wise precaution, although with a good vegetable intake of calcium it may not be necessary. Good sources of calcium include green vegetables, almonds, sesame seeds or tahini, cow’s milk, tofu, cheese, yoghurt, wholegrain cereals and pulses.

Vitamin D is essential for calcium absorption and can be obtained from sunlight, margarine and dairy products. If you have dark skin, cover much of your skin or spend little time outside you should consider taking a vitamin D supplement, especially in the winter months.

Folate / Folic Acid

Folate is one of the B vitamins needed in increased amounts during pregnancy, a lack of which has been shown to contribute to the possibility of birth defects. Vegetarians usually have a high intake since the best sources of this vitamin are green leafy vegetables, fruit, peanuts, yeast extract and wholegrain cereals. Research has shown that long term vegetarians have a particularly good folate status, however all women not using contraception are advised to take a 400 microgram supplement (400 µg) of folic acid every day, and for the first twelve weeks of your pregnancy.

Vitamin B12

This vitamin is essential to the growth and development of your baby. If adequate amounts of dairy products, eggs and fortified products such as yeast extract are included in your diet, then you should have enough vitamin B12. It is especially important for vegans to include a reliable source of vitamin B12 in the diet during pregnancy.

Some vegan foods, such as certain brands of soya milk, margarines, yeast extracts and veggieburger mixes are fortified with this vitamin, however, if you feel that your intake of vitamin B12 from your diet is unreliable, then a supplement is highly recommended.

Omega 3 fats

It is now recognised that long chain omega 3 fatty acids perform an important part in the development of the baby’s brain and eyesight while in the womb, so you should try to optimise your intake of omega 3 fats yourself. The simplest way to do this is by including two teaspoons of flax seed oil in your diet each day, taken either on its own or mixed into dressings etc. Flax oil is also available in vegetable capsules, as is algal oil, which is a direct source of DHA.

Being vegan and bringing up my son vegan is no problem. It’s such a healthy diet and Lucas is always bouncing with energy. I haven’t needed iron supplements with either of my pregnancies – unlike many meat-eating mums I know. Also, all the ‘danger’ foods are meat or dairy, so as a vegan I am automatically protecting my unborn child and myself from a number of health risks!

Kat
GENERAL ADVICE

Morning sickness
Studies show that about three quarters of all women experience nausea and vomiting during pregnancy, especially in the first few months, although it can last throughout pregnancy. Morning sickness can be relieved by having a dry biscuit or toast before getting up. Avoiding long intervals between meals helps, as nausea often occurs at the same time as hunger. Starchy foods, such as bread and potatoes, should be eaten regularly as they help maintain blood sugar level and fill the stomach, helping to relieve sickness.

Food safety
Vegetarians routinely avoid many of the foods that should be avoided in pregnancy, but remember to avoid soft cheeses such as Brie and mould ripened cheese such as Stilton, because of the risk of listeria. Cottage cheese or hard cheeses, such as Cheddar, should be used instead. Both free-range and battery eggs have been found to contain salmonella, so raw or lightly cooked eggs should be avoided. Vitamin A supplements should also be avoided (even if part of a multi-vitamin).

If the pregnant woman or the baby’s father, or any previous children have a history of hay fever, asthma, eczema or other allergies, it is recommended that peanuts and foods containing them (including groundnut oil) be avoided in the diet while pregnant and breastfeeding.

Digestive problems
Heartburn is very common in the later stages of pregnancy. It can be alleviated by avoiding large meals and instead choosing small frequent meals or snacks. It can help to sit up very straight when eating and avoid activity just after a meal. Spicy and fatty foods, fizzy drinks and citrus fruits can make the problem worse. During pregnancy, the digestive system absorbs nutrients more efficiently and this can contribute to constipation. Iron tablets often make the problem worse. Constipation can be relieved by increasing fluid intake and including plenty of whole grain cereals, pulses, fruits and vegetables in the diet.

CONCLUSION
A healthy vegetarian diet can provide you with all the nutrients you need during your pregnancy and give your baby the best possible start in life. A vitamin and mineral supplement should not be needed if a good balanced vegetarian diet is followed, but will not cause any harm if taken as a precaution, but choose one without vitamin A.